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SUBJECT: DISSENTERS' DAY EVENTS IN MOSCOW RALLY CROWDS FOR,
AGAINST GOVERNMENT

REF: VLADIVOSTOK 8

11. (SBU) Summary: January 31 Dissenters' Day rallies in Moscow proved a failure for democratic and radical opposition groups, which focused more on attracting press coverage than domestic support. Not a single major leader of the liberal democratic opposition appeared at the amateurish "flash mob" staged by the Solidarity movement and Other Russia, and radical writer/performance artist Eduard Limonov was arrested as he had planned. The Communists and the ultra-nationalist Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR) staged much larger rallies, with the Communists unfurling a litany of anti-government rhetoric and calling for widespread nationalization of resources. Approved rallies by non-party groups (Union of Soviet Soldiers and TIGR, a radical automobilisti group protesting automobile tariffs) attracted small crowds and little police or media attention. United Russia's well-financed rally attracted 5,000 people to the day's largest event, a pro-government rally outside the Kremlin walls. End Summary.

Illegal Rallies Attract Press More Than Protesters

12. (SBU) On the January 31, "Dissenters' Day," approved and unapproved rallies took place in Moscow, respectively, for and against the ruling government (see reftel for details on Vladivostok protests). Rallies also took place in other cities throughout Russia, without significant numbers joining the anti-government manifestation. The democratic opposition managed only to organize a small flash mob on Bolshaya Polyanka Street in central Moscow, where Other Russia and the new Solidarity movement emerged after a circuitous subway ride to the starting point. Approximately 100 protesters (as opposed to the 400 members claimed on Garry Kasparov's website and elsewhere) marched from Polyanka metro station to the Garden Ring Road. As the march began, approximately six youths wearing surgical masks approached the protesters and began to pummel them with fists and long metal rods, before being pushed back with pepper spray from the marchers. The march then proceeded four blocks to the Garden Ring, waving banners for Oborona and Kasparov's United Civil Front. Kasparov himself chose to stay home, while police detained at least five of his protesters. No more than 50 passersby even witnessed the march down the largely empty street, but one Solidarity contact nonetheless boasted to us laughably at the time that the march was "a complete success" because "the police were unable to prevent it."

13. (SBU) Members of the banned National Bolshevik Party (NBP) gathered first at the Vykhino metro station in southeast Moscow, where a party member was found beaten to death on January 14. As the Communists' rally on Triumphal Square concluded and the crowd dispersed, about a dozen NBP members entered the square, lit flares, and chanted, "Russia without Putin." The square had emptied by then, leaving only the police, NBP members, and at least two dozen members of the press. The large police presence, which had stood idly

during the Communist rally, sprang to action and quickly carried the NBP activists away to waiting vehicles, while press photographers surged forward to take pictures. Police detained NBP leader Eduard Limonov, who was released on February 1.

Approved Anti-Government Rallies Proceed Without Problems

14. (SBU) On Triumphal Square, the Communist Party attracted approximately 1,000 supporters to a government-approved rally that lasted one hour. The crowd of mostly elderly Russians waved Soviet flags, photos of Stalin and Lenin, and banners that decried the failure of capitalism and the corruption of the government and oligarchs. Long-time Communist Party leader Gennadiy Zyuganov delivered a brief speech that called for complete nationalization of Russia's natural resources and giving money directly to state enterprises to boost employment and production. Interrupted only briefly by a provocateur's smoke grenade and later by the low sweeps of a police helicopter, Zyuganov decried the government's alleged prioritization of oligarchs over "average Russians." One protester told us that he attended the rally because of his sense that "Russia is not for Russians any more," adding that "the government will return us to (the default of) 1998, and before then the homeland should give its wealth to all Russians, not to the oligarchs."

15. (SBU) At nearby Pushkin Square, Vladimir Zhirinovskiy and his ultra-nationalist Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR) held an approved 45-minute rally that attracted approximately 300 supporters. LDPR acknowledged to media

MOSCOW 00000254 002 OF 002

that it had not wanted to hold a rally, but felt compelled to since the Communists were holding one. In a nearby pedestrian underpass, about 60 LDPR supporters -- largely older men and women -- told us they were waiting to collect the 230 rubles (less than 7 USD) they had been promised to attend the rally. One man told us that if they would not have been there if they had not been paid to show up.

16. (SBU) At the Ulitsa 1905 Square, approximately 50 members of the Union of Soviet Officers, a gathering of retired military officers, gathered at an approved rally to protest the government's proposed military reforms. Retired General Fomin led the rally, which garnered only a nominal police presence. At the Chistiye Prudy metro, approximately 50-100 protesters gathered under the flag of the new TIGR movement, which held its first-ever public rally in Moscow. Previously, TIGR had existed only on-line in Moscow, having emerged first in Vladivostok as an offshoot of the radical avtomobilisti movement in the aftermath of the December protests in Vladivostok. (Note: In a January 23 meeting, Oborona Youth Movement leader Oleg Kozlovskiy told us that TIGR had held its first meeting in Moscow that week. In attendance, he reported, were one member from the Solidarity movement and ten members of the Movement Against Illegal Immigrants (DPNI). End note.)

17. (SBU) Outside the Kremlin walls, a pro-government rally sponsored by United Russia attracted approximately 5,000 people by police estimates. Soldiers distributed warm tea and biscuits to the crowd as temperatures hovered just below zero degrees Fahrenheit. Speakers called on citizens to rally behind the policies of President Medvedev and Prime Minister Putin.

Comment

18. (SBU) Not a single major democratic opposition leader participated in the Dissenters' Day events, and Solidarity and Other Russia failed to muster more than 100 people to Moscow's streets. If the amateurish flash mob marked the meager extent to which non-Duma forces can rally supporters,

the leaders' collective decision to stay home is not surprising. A key Solidarity leader boasted to us in October that Solidarity had the capability to marshal thousands of Russians to the streets against the government; in reality, however, nothing close to that has happened. To be sure, government restrictions on assembly and media access greatly hamper democratic opposition forces; but the poorly organized and lightly attended events in Moscow showed a democratic opposition focused more on appealing to media in the absence of significant support.

19. (SBU) The Communists fared best on Dissenters' Day, having conducted a professional rally and attracted a sizable, albeit somewhat superannuated, crowd of supporters. The government's willingness to allow the Communists to protest demonstrated a move to allow some space for political dissent, but only under tightly controlled circumstances. Still far from the reins of power, Zyuganov can enjoy increased opposition credentials without having to contemplate the realities of actually implementing the drastic policies he proposes. There is no indication yet that the Communists' platform will attract widespread support, but the upcoming March elections may enable them to expand their base and influence in some regions. End Comment.
BEYRLE